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THE PROBLEM OF IMMORTALITY IN THE LIGHT OF
RECENT BIOLOGY

The conclusions reached in Frank's recent book¹ are such as to arouse the interest of anyone who has reflected upon the problem of immortality. For the author has demonstrated to his own satisfaction that the most recent and radical results of biological science not merely harmonize with, but even furnish support for, belief in immortality. He accepts Haeckel's monistic conception of the universe, regarding it as the expression of a unitary substance which finds parallel manifestations in matter and spirit. As the living organism is composed of a myriad of individual cells so its soul is constituted of the combined psychic activity of these many cells. The true seat of the soul is not the visible body, however; for this is largely dead matter. The soul resides rather in the vital substance proper—those invisible particles of protoplasm, endowed with the active functions of life, which pervade the organism. This living material composes a "transparent, invisible replica of our exterior frames which we have seen occupies a thin layer of space throughout the continuity of our organism just exactly like it in configuration yet ever invisible on the plane of matter." This invisible duplicate of our exterior frame consists of vital matter that has never known death, having been transmitted to our personal organism from the first bit of living substance that was formed on this planet. Now the soul which is a function of these bioplasts is more than the aggregate activities of them all. It is this "plus the additional and triumphant quality that follows complete organization." Thus the personal soul is endowed with an individual capacity far superior to that of the sum of cell souls constituting it. In man where there is distinct self-consciousness, and particularly in those men in whom reason and will are most exercised, the capacity of the soul as an organized unity is very highly developed. It is in this power of organized intelligence to dominate and control the matter in which it resides that the author finds ground for believing that immortality is possible—at least for those of requisite spiritual attainment. "May we not suppose that if the principle of self-consciousness has been in the individual life developed to a sufficiently high degree, it may be able to carry over and hold in organic aggregation such highly developed cells as shall continue to function in conscious activity after the dead exterior has dissolved in thin air?"

These ideas are interesting and suggestive. The author has tried to do

¹*Modern Light on Immortality.* By Henry Frank. Boston: Sherman, French & Co., 1909. 467 pages. \$1.85.

his work thoroughly, taking pains to make every step in the argument clear and buttressing every assertion by copious references to recent biological works. In the discussion of the light thrown by modern biology on the problem of immortality, the book is valuable and stimulating. It is a pity that the author has given this, the main portion of his work, such an introduction. He has, he informs us in the preface, "wholly freed himself from whatever traditional and superstitious disposition toward the subject he might have inherited from ancestral and hereditary influences." He may have succeeded, but he contracted in their place a set of new prejudices—the prejudices of the scientific propagandist of 25 years ago when the controversy over evolution was hottest and there were exaggerations and misunderstandings on both sides. The first half of the book is devoted to a history of the conception of a future life. In these chapters the author betrays a constant animus against both theology and philosophy, seeming to assume that they are enemies of all sound science. His account of Greek philosophy is quite arbitrary and misleading—containing such blunders as that of calling Anaximander an atomist and of asserting that the world-view of the pre-Socratic physicists was better balanced and more synthetic than that of Plato and Aristotle. Modern idealism as he represents it is a ridiculous caricature of the views of men like Caird and Royce. It is amusing to find that after rejecting with scant courtesy the attempts of great modern philosophers to adjust the conflicting claims of the mental and the material he finds a satisfactory synthesis in Haeckel's "philosophy of substance," the inconsistencies and contradictions of which are glaring and notorious. It is to be hoped that before the author writes his proposed second volume he will make the acquaintance of some of the leading philosophers and psychologists of the present—men who take the fact of evolution for granted and welcome every fresh discovery of science, but who by their training are better prepared for the work of synthesis and final formulation of results than are scientific specialists, no matter how great their knowledge may be of a particular field. The exponent of objective idealism should not complain too much, however; for this work gives unconscious testimony to the strength of his position. For it is in its capacity of self-consciousness, in its power of active organization that Mr. Frank finds best evidence of the soul's immortality.

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